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### Negotiating the liminal divide: some Italian-Australian diasporic poets

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## Negotiating the liminal divide: some Italian-Australian diasporic poets

### Abstract

This essay offers a survey of some of the leading first-generation Italian-Australian poets, and does not attempt to be definitive. As Adam Aitken points out in his 'Asian-Australian Diasporic Poets: A Commentary' (Cordite, 1 August 2012), 'Diasporic poetics raise more questions than they answer and are just as much about dis-placement as about place, just as much about a 'poetics of uncertainty' as about certainties of style/nation/identity.' Diasporic poetics is, arguably, also very much a poetics of engagement with the liminal divide, a process that is not linear but cyclic, as crossings in liminal space and time join an implicit, complex and not altogether unproblematic but nevertheless positive Australian present to the recall of the joys and sorrows of an ever-present pre-migration past.

### Keywords

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# Gaetano Rando

## Negotiating the Liminal Divide: Some Italian-Australian Diasporic Poets

1 September 2013

The publication last year of Paolo Totaro's *Collected Poems* marks the latest in a long series of poetry collections by Italians who have migrated to Australia. Raffaello Carboni, author of the iconic *The Eureka Stockade*, was a poet in his own right. So was Pietro Baracchi, Government Astronomer of Victoria in the early 1900s. Most of the poetic production in the early period can, however, be dated to the 1930s, when the 30,000-strong Italian community had become the largest non-Anglo-Celtic group in Australia. After the hiatus caused by the war and the internment of some 4700 Italian-Australian men, the production of poetry by Italian-Australians resumed exponentially in the wake of the post-1947 immigration boom that saw about 300,000 Italians come to Australia between 1947 and 1972. Over the years some forty-five first-generation Italian-Australians have published about 120 volumes of poetry, the bulk in Italian but some volumes with texts in English, Italian and English or Italian and dialect. Several hundred others have had their poetry published in newspapers, magazines and anthologies.

This essay offers a survey of some of the leading first-generation Italian-Australian poets, and does not attempt to be definitive. As Adam Aitken points out in his 'Asian-Australian Diasporic Poets: A Commentary' (*Cordite*, 1 August 2012), 'Diasporic poetics raise more questions than they answer and are just as much about dis-placement as about place, just as much about a 'poetics of uncertainty' as about certainties of style/nation/identity.' Diasporic poetics is, arguably, also very much a poetics of engagement with the liminal divide, a process that is not linear but cyclic, as crossings in liminal space and time join an implicit, complex and not altogether unproblematic but nevertheless positive Australian present to the recall of the joys and sorrows of an ever-present pre-migration past.

Most of the poetry written in the 1920s and 1930s displayed styles and techniques (odes, sonnets and ballads) that reflected the traditional Italian literary canon of past centuries, which was taught in the schools that these writers attended before they migrated. With few exceptions, their texts did not reflect the contemporary Italian poetry scene that included poets such as 1959 and 1975 Nobel prize-winners Salvatore Quasimodo and Eugenio Montale. Poems were written mainly in literary Italian, with relatively few being written in the dialects of the Italian peninsula – although the cultural background of the majority of Italian-Australians was one linked to popular culture and the dialect rather than to high culture and the standard language. The main themes constantly represented in both this and

the post-1947 corpi were personal themes which may or may not include the migration experience; the recall of Italy's past glories; nostalgia for the pre-migration past which, for a number of poets, became a productive force for understanding the dissonance between homeland culture, society and that of the adopted country; and comment on Australian events and attitudes.

'Sbadigli ironici' ['Ironical Yawns'], a poem written in 1927 by Porfirio Scotto (reprinted in Rando and Andreoni 1973, 343), reflects with irony on Australian attitudes of the time that Italians have had to emigrate from Italy since they are poor beggars with little beer.

### **Sbadigli ironici**

Le glorie ambite in questa amata terra  
dona a una mandra di ladroni,  
sovrani in pace, imperatori in Guerra.  
Soltanto noi, dei poveri accattoni,  
nel piccolo stivale ci rinserra  
con meno birra e molte invenzioni.

### **Ironical Yawns**

The glories sought in this much-loved land  
given to a handful of thieves  
sovereigns in peace, emperors in war.  
Only we, who are poor beggars,  
are relegated to the small boot that is Italy

with little beer but much invention.

Another poem, 'Il monito' ['The Warning'] – published anonymously in 1934 (reprinted in Rando and Andreoni 1973, 345-6) at the time when the British Preference League was vigorously promoting a policy of putting culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) workers much lower on the job preference list than their Anglo-Celtic peers – is addressed to the Italian woodcutters of Herbert River and comments on the fact that preference for Italian workers is a thing of the past. In a similar vein, Gaetano De Luca's 'Dici lu ngrisi' ['The English Say'] (1932) (reprinted in Rando and Andreoni 1973, 344), written significantly in the Sicilian dialect, sighs nostalgically for the sparse but simple life he has left behind in Sicily and describes Australia's Anglo-Celtic inhabitants as boastful and vainglorious, unable to do anything on their own initiative.

Among the poets who published in the Italian-Australian press during the 1930s was Lino Grassuti (also spelled Grasuti) – a pen-name then used by Luigi Strano, who was born at Castellace di Oppido Mamertina in southern Italy in 1913 and emigrated to Sydney in 1929 (where he passed away in 2009). Although he quickly achieved a secure and respected socioeconomic position, Strano did not aspire to live by bread alone. Shortly after his arrival, he learned English, Latin, Greek and German, and began to publish poetry in Italian-Australian newspapers. His texts (sonnets, *canzoni*, and ballads) were initially written in literary Italian and modeled closely on the Italian classical literary canon. Throughout the 1930s, stylistic and thematic changes led him to progressively adopt a more 'modern' approach, and to write not only in Italian but also in English, the Calabrian dialect and Latin. Over the years, Strano published twenty volumes of poetry and two volumes of memoirs. His literary activities earned him recognition as one of the leading first-generation Italian-Australian poets, and in 1985 he received an honorary Master of Arts degree from the University of Wollongong for his literary and cultural achievements.

Luigi Strano developed as a poet without regrets or nostalgia; he was able to assimilate and adapt not only traditional and modern Italian poetry, but also English and Anglo-Australian poetry, achieving his own brand of free and profound literary communication. His poetry explores a wide range of themes expressed with rare unembellished sincerity. These themes include everyday realities as well as the existential aspects of the diaspora, the poet's relationship with his native land and his adopted country, nature, Australian society, and Italian migrants' reactions and attitudes towards Australians. But Strano's poetry also embraces more 'universal' themes relating to life, love and philosophy. Life is seen as a rocky road that leads to a succession of painful and joyous experiences, but which still needs to be lived to the full and at the highest level of one's humanity, since '*è tutto ciò che abbiamo*' (it's the only thing we have) ('La vita non è ombra' ['Life is Not a Shadow'], Rando 1983, 126). Feelings and attitudes towards his native land expressed in poems such as 'Castellace' (Strano 1959,

8) and 'La mia terra' [My Land] (Rando 1983, 127) are complex and not without contradiction. They range from the denunciation of the hate and violence endemic in his home town to the realisation that the place and its meaning can never be forgotten, even though returning there can be a mixed experience of sadness and of joy.

### **La mia terra**

Il paese natio non si scorda,  
anche quando non c'è alcuna  
ragione d'amarlo ...  
ma io porto con me,  
la gioia e il dolore  
della mia terra [ ... ]  
Amo il paese che m'ospita,  
ma chi può sopprimere  
le visioni del dormi-veglia?

### **My Land**

You cannot forget your native land  
even when there is no  
reason to love it ...  
but I carry within me  
the joy and the pain  
of my country [ ... ]

I love the country that has taken me in

but who can suppress

the visions of dreaming?

Equally complex are feelings and attitudes towards Strano's adopted country. The Australian wilderness can present cruel and tragic aspects ('Bush Fire', Rando and Andreoni 1973, 350-1) but the wide open spaces, the landscape, the untainted sky and the primordial bush often provide a setting for serene contemplation, a sense of peace and stability, a place for thought and philosophy. By contrast, the landscape of Strano's native Calabria, although rich in history and natural beauty, is considered in retrospect to be more disturbing because of its endemic problems caused by the presence of humanity. Less inviting or encouraging is Australia's social landscape, characterised by a degrading materialism that leaves little scope for the expression of difference, and relegates to the fringe those (CALD migrants, Aboriginal people) who cannot or do not wish to assimilate. 'U Pappu a l'Australia' ['Grand-dad in Australia'] (Strano 1964, 9), written in the Calabrian dialect, is a strikingly realistic and emblematic depiction of the existential anguish of elderly parents brought to Australia by their children for the sake of family reunion.

#### **'U Pappu a l'Australia**

'Mmavissi 'rrumputu l'anchi

quandu partia di jani!

lu 'mmorzu d'ortu

e lu pertusu i casa l'avia,

chi mi mancava u pani?

'cca simu comu

non si canusci nenti,

non sai mancu chi 'ttinnu,

lu patri non è patri,

non c'è 'chìu religioni;

ti manca di rispettu

chiddu chi s'avi e fari ...

simu comu i nimali,  
parlandu cu crianza,  
peju di li maiali;  
si campa pe la panza! ...

### **Grand-dad in Australia**

Would that I had broken my hip  
before leaving my place.  
A piece of land I had  
and a roof over my head,  
nor was I short of bread.  
Here we're as if  
nobody knows nothing  
not even how things are,  
a father's not a father,  
there's no more religion,  
and even an as yet unborn child  
has no respect for me ...  
We're like animals,  
worse than swine,  
speaking with respect;  
we live only for our bellies! ...



Personal relationships constitute another dominant and constant theme in Strano's work, with poems like 'A Phyllis H.' (Strano 1981, 6), 'A fortunato la rosa' (Strano 1984, 11) and 'Linda' (Strano 1959, 23). This theme predominates in the volume *Elvira* (Strano 2002), published after the death of his sister, which expresses the memories, the reflections and the good and the bad places of a long life spent together.

#### **A fortunato La Rosa – buonanima**

Fortunato!

nome quasi d'ironia.

Quanto hai lottato

e perseverato

contro le avversità [ ... ]

Nella vita tutto

t'è giunto tardi;

la professione

la famiglia

il ritorno in patria,

tardi, molto tardi e fatale! [ ... ]

ed or mi morde il rimpianto

di non averti abbracciato

per l'ultima volta,

d'aver sempre

preso da te tanto

e dato così poco!

## **To Lucky La Rosa – rest his soul**

Lucky!

An almost ironic name.

How you struggled

and persevered

against adversity [ ... ]

In your life

all came late to you;

your profession

your family

and the return to your native land,

late, very late and fatal! [ ... ]

and now I deeply regret

not to have embraced you

for the last time,

to have always

taken so much from you

and given so little!

Enoe Raffaelli Di Stefano was born in Rovereto in 1921. After obtaining a primary-teaching diploma, she emigrated to Sydney in 1949. She became a well-known personality in the Italian-Australian community through her work with the Italian-language newspaper *La Fiamma*, as a broadcaster for community radio programs, and as a driving force in the promotion of Italian-language classes for second-generation Italian-Australian children. Her artistic aspirations found expression in painting as

well as in the production of poetry and prose, gaining her recognition as one of the leading first-generation Italian-Australian writers.

While Di Stefano's narrative presents an investigation of the diaspora experience based on sociocultural parameters and with generally positive outcomes, her poetry is a detailed, sensitively expressed lyric diary that presents a complex and not always positive comparison of the ambience, the traditions, the temporal and natural spaces of her native land and those of her adopted country. From nostalgia for Italy to appraisal of the new country, her first two volumes, *Terra australis* (Di Stefano 1970) and *Voci di lontananza* [*Voices Far Away*] (Di Stefano 1978), express feelings and reflections triggered by the experiences of the migrant: the temporal dislocation of the physical and metaphysical journey that marks the transition from Italy to Australia; the strange and different material and spiritual facets of the new country; the memory of pre-migration places and experiences.

### **La favilla**

Non sapevo che sarei andata

lontana dalla terra mia,

tra gente straniera,

discordante di suoni e di maniera.

Priva d'ogni goder, d'ogni passione,

m'assecondai alla patria

che competevo senza convinzione.

E dopo m'adattai. Capii che

vivere è una lotta in uno

o in un altro posto e fui più forte,

più in pace con la vita.

(Rando 1986, 44)

## **The Spark**

I did not know that I would have gone  
far from my native land,  
among foreign people,  
discordant in sounds and in manner.  
Deprived of all pleasure, of all passion,  
I complied with the new land  
that I contemplated without conviction.  
And later I adapted. I understood that  
life is a struggle in one  
place or the other and I became stronger,  
more at peace with life.

In her next two volumes, *Mio e non mio* [*Mine and Not Mine*] (Di Stefano 1985) and *Se rimarrà qualcosa* [*If Something Will Remain*] (Di Stefano 1988), Di Stefano explored the concept that although she no longer felt that she entirely belonged to Italy, she realised that she had not achieved acceptance of her new country. While the time spent in Australia had weakened ties with her native land, the new country, despite its positive aspects, had not fully satisfied all of the migrant's spiritual aspirations. She had, however, come to appreciate the material security Australia had to offer, and its natural beauty – even though there are instances of doubt. The silence that descends with sunset in the Australian eucalyptus forest creates an environment of doubtful happiness. Limited joy is found in the celebration of an Australian Easter – through the uneasiness provoked by the inversion of the seasons and the different practices that mark the celebration, which, to some extent, are a mixture of old and new traditions. These emotions are intermingled with memories of her native Trentino and her periodic visits back to Italy.

## **Pasqua australiana**

Inutile cercare nei ricordi  
la Pasqua primaverile,

questa è Pasqua d'autunno,

ricca di fiori, non di promesse.

E allora?

Arrostiremo bistecche all'aperto

all'ombra dei canfori odorosi

e berremo un bicchiere,

ci diremo "Buona Pasqua"

e taglieremo al dolce una colomba,

di mandorle e canditi,

per mantenere quel poco

che è ancora possibile della vecchia tradizione.

(Cincotta 1989, 64)

### **Australian Easter**

No use looking for the memory

of a spring-time Easter,

this is an autumn Easter,

rich in flowers, not in promises.

And so?

We'll barbecue our steaks in the open air

in the shadow of fragrant camphora trees

and we'll drink a glass of wine

and say “Happy Easter” to each other  
and we’ll cut a dove-shaped cake,  
of almonds and dried fruit,  
to maintain what little  
is possible of our old traditions

In her final volume *L’itinerario* [*The Itinerary*] (Di Stefano 1997), Di Stefano reflected on the outcomes of a life spent between two worlds. The memory of her Italian past was now distant in time, and it was no longer possible for her to contemplate alternatives that might have been, despite lingering reservations in her relationship with Australia. Compared to Strano’s poetry, themes that relate to the collective aspects of the diaspora are less evident in Di Stefano’s work. The poem ‘Lucia’ (Rando 1986, 49), however, can be read as emblematic of the situation of aged Italian-Australians forced to end their lives in a nursing home in a foreign land, while ‘Discorso vuoto’ [‘Speech without Meaning’] (Cincotta 1989, 63) subtly criticises the panegyric speech inevitably delivered whenever an Italian politician is sent on a lavishly funded trip to Australia to visit the Italian-Australian community.

### **Discorso vuoto**

Ma Senatore,  
le sue parole vuote,  
adatte su misura  
ad un pubblico ingenuo  
e domani già scordate,  
permetta che le chieda a cosa servono?  
Ha mai capito  
per un breve istante  
cosa significa  
essere emigrante?

## Speech without Meaning

But Senator,  
  
may I ask what is the use of  
  
your empty words,  
  
made to measure  
  
for a naive audience  
  
and tomorrow already forgotten?  
  
Have you ever understood  
  
even for a brief instant  
  
what it means  
  
to be a migrant?

Enoe Di Stefano's poetic journey was ultimately an optimistic one, doubts and nostalgia notwithstanding, and her integrated contemplation of life and the migration experience indicated a large measure of acceptance of her adopted land, as well as the achievement of an equilibrium between past and present. It is a journey that 'even if it is always autobiographically based ... is the same migratory path followed by millions of Italians who have left their country' (O'Connor 2003, 9).

Lino Concas was born in Gonnosfanadigia on the island of Sardinia in 1930 and, after having obtained a degree in philosophy, emigrated to Melbourne in 1963. There he became a secondary-school teacher of Italian. He began writing poetry at the age of fifteen, and his subsequent production of poetic texts has placed him among the leading first-generation Italian-Australian poets. His first volume, *Brandelli d'anima* [*Shreds of a Soul*] (Concas 1965), is a collection of his early poems about love, solitude, alienation, religious vocation, the need for life and for purification.

## Siccità

Ho bisogno d'acqua  
e piove sangue  
nelle mie zolle arse.  
Non basta a spegnere  
la mia sete  
il sudore degli uomini stanchi [ ... ]  
Ho bisogno d'acqua nell'Altare  
ove anche tu, Signore,  
sei fatto di pane e di acqua.  
L'acqua può lavare il mio sangue.  
Mi sento già nel covone di morte.  
(Concas 1998, 28)

## **Drought**

I need water  
and it rains blood  
on my parched turf.  
The sweat of tired men  
is not enough  
to quench my thirst [ ... ]  
I need water on the altar  
where you too, Lord,



are made of bread and water.

Water can wash my blood.

I already feel I am in death's sheaf.

It also introduced the theme of migration, elaborated on in his second volume of poetry, *Ballata di vento* [*Ballad of the Wind*] (Concas 1977). This collection focused on the sense of exile resulting from migration to Australia, seen as a land forever foreign, given the impossibility of assimilation. These ideas are developed in the subsequent two volumes, *Uomo a metà* [*Half a Man*] (Concas 1981) and *L'altro uomo: Poesie 1981–1983* [*The Other Man: Poems 1981–1983*] (Concas 1988), in which the native land is revisited and reassessed not only from the point of view of an exile's nostalgia, but from the critical perspective of the social and existential conditions that forced the poet to leave.

### **In terra straniera**

Il canguro a fine giornata

chiuse ha le braccia

in croce dopo svelti salti

in circo aperto al sole.

Anch'io nudo mi trovo

la sera, fra le ombre,

aggrappato ad una roccia

e sale la preghiera

e il mio grido

come volo d'ali

tra sentieri smarrito

in terra straniera.

(Concas 1998, 43)

## **In a Foreign Land**

The kangaroo at the end of the day  
closes its arms  
in the shape of a cross after quick jumps  
in a circle open to the sun.  
I too find myself naked  
in the evening, among the shadows,  
clinging to a rock  
and my prayer  
and my cry rise  
like a flight of wings  
lost among paths  
in a foreign land.

Australia, while still a foreign land, is seen as slightly less alienating since it has begun to accept some aspects of the Italian migrant presence.

These four volumes, reprinted in the first volume of his *opera omnia*, *Poesie Volume 1* (Concas 1998a), constitute the first phase of Concas's poetic journey, while his subsequent poetry, published in *Poesie Volume 2* (Concas 1998b), is a metaphysical investigation that explores possible points of equilibrium between Australia and his native Sardinia.

*Malee*, an Aboriginal word for the scrub that periodically explodes in the flames of a bushfire, is also 'the expression of feelings ... of something that burns inside [me]' (Concas 1998b, 2]. This collection juxtaposes the contrasting realities of Sardinians and Aborigines, groups that live 'on the fringes of the modern world' (Concas 1998b, 2), both having been subject to invasion, dispossession, exploitation, and then forgotten. In its search for connections between places and times that appear so very different, but that can contain significant common meanings, *Muggil* explores the links between the 'primitiveness' of the Australian Aboriginal and the Sardinian shepherd whose traditions have been obliterated by modern society.

## **Il mio fratello aborigino**

Io come te, fratello,  
invoco il sole e la pioggia,  
come te attingo in caverne  
il mio sangue per vivere [ ... ]  
E come te attendo  
il riapparire della notte  
che mi ha generato  
col sacro fuoco  
dai confini remoti,  
memorie lontane del mio io  
disciolto in sabbia e pietre.  
(Concas 1998b, 153)

## **My Aboriginal Brother**

I, like you, my brother,  
invoke the sun and the rain,  
like you I obtain in caves  
my blood in order to live [ ... ]  
And like you I await  
the return of the night

that has generated me  
with sacred fire  
on long distant shores,  
distant memories of my being  
dissolved in sand and stone.

The comparison between Australia, which has now become the poet's land too, and his place of origin is the macro-theme of *L'Uomo del silenzio* [*The Man of Silence*]. This collection explores the possibility of conciliation between the two worlds by juxtaposing an Australian present with a Sardinian past that is still very much alive both in memory and in the contemplation of a possible return. *L'Uomo del silenzio* also reappraises the physical and metaphysical rites of passage from the old land to the new; Australia's history, society and urban landscape; and the meaning of the world of the Aboriginal cultures – which has almost disappeared, but which has left significant traces for those who desire to seek them. The merging of Australia and Sardinia is continued in the final section of the volume *Cobar*, an Aboriginal word meaning 'red earth,' which is also the name of an opal-mining settlement in the Australian outback. Christmas in Australia has now become '*felice senza neve*' [happy without snow] (Concas 1998b, 225) because of the blending of both 'ethnic' and Anglo-Celtic traditions, while the landscapes of Sardinia and Australia merge in an ideal unity, a merging that is also seen to occur in some aspects of the two cultural traditions.

### **Melbourne**

Privilegi i canti d'Europa  
come torma  
di fatiche e di speranza  
e la musica di  
un ballo gitano come armonia  
delle tue native foreste.  
Tu che nascondi  
i miei crepuscoli ai sogni  
e mi dai le voci

pulsanti di passione  
accogli questa volontà  
acerba di amare  
come profetica certezza [ ... ]  
dove fiorisce il sangue  
della mia vecchia terra.  
(Concas 1998b, 150)

## **Melbourne**

You favour the songs of Europe  
like a multitude  
of hard work and hope  
and the music  
of a gypsy dance like the harmony  
of your native forests.  
You that hide  
my twilights in dreams  
and give me voices  
pulsating with passion  
welcome this willingness  
unripe from loving  
as prophetic certainty [ ... ]

where the blood

of my old country flourishes.

Lino Concas's poetry is the expression of an intensely lived internal life in which engagement with personal diasporic liminal space and time is an important overriding element, where the discovery of hope and love in the adopted land alleviates existential anguish, and where the Sardinian shepherd and the Australian Aboriginal meet and recognise each other in a universal bond of suffering and redemption. As Luigi Strano does for Calabria and the Australian bush, Concas has created a link between the desolate mountains of his native Sardinia and the red deserts of Australia, reaching an ideal though not uncritical fusion between the two worlds.

Paolo Totaro, born in Naples in 1933, has been living in Australia since 1963 as a result of the diaspora of corporate executives (for FIAT tractors in Oceania, in his case) who promoted Italian industry abroad in the wake of Italy's economic miracle. His considerable managerial skills and his wide cultural interests – he has university degrees in law and music – led him to accept an offer to create the Community Arts Board of the Australia Council in 1975. From 1977 to 1989, he was foundation chair of the Ethnic Affairs Commission of New South Wales, and in that role pioneered many fundamental multicultural initiatives. A busy schedule that also includes journalism, television appearances and an interest in science has not prevented him from practicing chamber music and writing. His short story '*Storia patria*' ['Homeland Story'] won the *Premio Letterario 2 Giugno* literary prize in 1993.

Totaro is a fine prose writer, however, his forte in the field of creative writing is poetry. He writes both in Italian and English, and was the first writer (and is still one of the very few) to depict the soundtrack of Australia's multicultural work environment, rich in linguistic dislocations. His corpus of poetry remained largely unpublished until his volume *Collected Poems* appeared in 2012, although some of his poems had appeared in magazines and anthologies, as well as in the volume *Paolo poesie* (Totaro 1981).

The themes enunciated in Totaro's poetry range from the unforgettable childhood traumas of war, to the dilemma of whether to follow music or other vocations, to the expressive tension between Catholic and Marxist, humanistic and scientific, Italian and Australian cultures and a search for possible equilibriums between them. His early poetry expressed the rebellion of a young intellectual towards the elitist culture of his place of origin. His later Australian poems focused on the awareness that participation in the culture of his adopted country contributed to its transformation. There are explicit references to the diaspora, although they are by and large veiled by the need not to indulge in nostalgia. The migration experience is thus perceived as the courageous translocation from one

society to another, representing constant dynamic change, a linguistic mixture. The challenge of not overlooking the reciprocal recognition of the continuity and dignity of each individual person and the validity of their cultural and linguistic base is at the fore. In this context, Totaro's plurilinguistic lyric experimentation – more unique than rare in Italian-Australian poetry – is particularly interesting, and displays a sensitivity towards the human condition of the migrant. Many of these poems written in a mix of languages relate to salient aspects of the presence of CALD first-generation migrants in Australia, who account for about 12 per cent of its population. Poems like 'Port Kembla' (Totaro 2012, 196), composed in 1977, express the theme of the 'nonmeaning' of life in the punishing environment of the blast furnaces at the steelworks, and present interesting parallels with the poems of Pietro Tedeschi (1997).

### **Port Kembla**

Extremadura

coke havens

altiforni hornos

de fundicion

aqui la vita è breve

meaningless

non ha significado

hermanos o calor

red-hot-white

blanco fierro

c'è ancora l'hope

y l'esperanza

da l'Extremadura

tu veinist you came

frade meu

brothero

español ancora

and yet

el pianto mio

my cry

si confounds se mixa

col tuo

In ‘6 p.m. Cleaners’ (Cincotta 1989, 132) plurilingualism becomes the symbol of the brotherhood among workers from Italy, Spain and Latin America, a brotherhood that in ‘Homer: fish shops’ (Totaro 2012, 194) is extended also to Greeks.

### **Homer: fish shops**

Telemacos

Con Karanges

fish and more fish shops

antica ecclesia orthodoxa

di Wollongong

colle pitture y madonne

negras ebony

la mia coscienza

si confounds

tell me Jimmy Joyce

qual’è quis est

il greco?

Further references to Australian pluriculturalism are found in the exquisitely transformational ‘L’English Ghetto: Gardeners’ (Totaro 2012, 195), while ‘Chester Hill: Refugee School’ (Totaro 2012, 197) provides an incisive and sensitive early perspective on a theme – the trauma suffered by refugee children – that is now even more poignant than it was in the 1970s.



## **Chester Hill: Refugee School**

Vietnam est fini  
et tu almond-eyed  
est ici  
among strangers?  
hardly so si tu veux  
love avoir qui t'enseigne-teach  
la langue English  
with les dessins from Peanuts  
et tu? de Beirut  
la guerre est fini  
pour tous parents  
poor orphans  
of us all  
pauvre infelicitè  
de notre  
madnesse

Paolo Totaro's existential plurilingualism, however, also marks crossings with pre-migratory experiences. 'Conversazioni mute' [Mute Conversations] (Totaro 2012, 64), four poems written in 1985, were inspired by Totaro's sudden return to Naples because of the imminent death of his father, and they articulate memories of past and present relationships with him. Relationships with his environment and the people that are important in his life – his Jesuit teachers, his parents, his wife, his children – constitute a major theme in his poetry. In 'Linee diritte: Straight lines' (Totaro 2012, 110), Pittwater (on the coast north of Sydney and surrounded by an immense national park, on whose shores Totaro lives) is portrayed as an idealised oasis of peace that exists in sharp contrast with the hectic and alienating environment of the New South Wales political arena.

### **Linee diritte: Straight lines**

Scure bande di terra  
sottolineate dal brulichio bianco  
di barche minutamente ancorate.  
In alto, larghe onde di eucalipti  
intrecciano dita di rosa in riccioli  
di nuvole.

“O rododactylos eos”  
precede d’estate qui in Australia  
il vento di nordovest  
che fra un’ora  
scompiglierà il mare  
e le linee ora dritte  
saranno, per il resto del giorno,  
incertamente increspate.

### **Linee diritte: Straight Lines**

Dark strips of earth  
underlined by a white shimmering  
of closely anchored boats.  
Up high, wide waves of eucalyptus trees  
interlace rosy fingers into curls

of clouds.

“The Rosy fingered dawn”

precedes in Australia during summer

the northwest wind

that within an hour

will stir up the sea

and the lines now straight

will be uncertainly rough

for the rest of the day.

Pittwater, where the calm dawn sea is later disturbed by the midday trade winds, represents a serenity that perhaps mirrors a conscience disturbed by the tension between a wistful aspiration to interior peace and the reality of social conflict. This is distinctly expressed in ‘Volontà di sorridere’ [Wanting to Smile] (Totaro 2012, 156). The difficulty of saying things that really count in ‘Volontà di parlare’ [Wanting to Speak] (Totaro 2012, 150) expresses that active participation in the culture of the adopted country is a no less wistful aspiration than past participation in the culture of the country of origin.

The old, the new, the exotic, the familiar and the stress of constant travel are the themes of ‘A mio padre e mia madre’ [To My Mother and Father] (Totaro 2012, 58), written in the 1960s when Totaro travelled the world on behalf of Fiat. Addressing his faraway parents, he invites them to come to Sydney to see his new life. He recalls with yearning the sound of his mother’s footsteps when she would get up to make the coffee that would send her back to sleep, and the image of his father, and his abandoned land in Puglia with its wine, olives and wheat. The exotic totems brought from New Guinea become ‘two obscure Christs’ that share space on the walls of his Sydney home with two other familiar totems brought from Naples, the miniature portrait of a baroness aunt and the ‘mute’ square of a Sacred Heart.

### **A mio padre e mia madre**

Sono passato anche per la Guinea

e son tornato con il cargo oscuro

di due cristi procedenti

senza schiavi nè usci  
ed ornate di case e di molluschi.  
Sono ora appesi al muro come la baronessa  
minata e il sacro cuore muto.  
Tu non li hai visti, e come i doni  
che ti tresagisco, abiti di silenzio  
questa casa. Il mio cuore sarebbe  
quei passi quei tre pezzi di suono  
alla mattina, alle sei, nella trasparenza  
del cammino dalla camera da letto  
alla cucina. “Il caffè fa dormire ...”

### **To My Mother and Father**

I've been to New Guinea too  
and I've returned with the obscure cargo  
of two primitive Christs  
without slaves or entrances  
adorned with houses and molluscs.  
They are now hung on the wall like  
the miniature Baroness and the mute Sacred Heart.  
You haven't seen them, and like the gifts  
that I hold for you, you live in this house

in silence. My heart would be  
those steps those three pieces of sound  
in the morning, at six, in the transparency  
of walking from the bedroom  
to the kitchen. “Coffee makes you sleep ...”

‘Comizio 1950’ [Meeting 1950] (Totaro 2012, 70) describes a *passeggiata* in the ancient historical centre of the city of Naples and a metaphor of the passage from Benedetto Croce’s neoidealistic philosophy, studied by many students in the Italian south at the time, towards Gramsci and Togliatti’s brand of Marxism. The poet – then twenty and a student at the Conservatorium – and his friends talk about the fact that Naples presents few opportunities, and that they would soon have to leave, perhaps for the most distant corner of the world, which perspicaciously is identified as Australia.

Characterised by an impressive variety of stylistic expression, Paolo Totaro’s writings mark a poetic ‘journey’ that, while not losing touch with his point of departure, has moved forward in the last decade. Unlike most first-generation Italian-Australian poets, Totaro has become concerned with English metric forms – so different from their Italian counterparts – and several of his more recent unpublished poems show a remarkable awareness of the English ‘line’.

Born in Coreno Ausonio in 1939, Mariano Coreno migrated to Melbourne in 1956. He has since engaged in various occupations, never losing sight of his activities as a writer and his deep commitment to social issues. In the fifty years that he has been writing poetry, he has published eight volumes, while his work has also appeared widely in newspapers, journals and anthologies in both Australia and Italy. Coreno’s first four volumes of poetry, *Gioia straziata* [Anguished Joy] (Coreno 1962), *Pianto d’amore* [Tears of Love] (Coreno 1963), *Ricordanze* [Memories] (Coreno 1964), and *Sotto la luna* [Under the Moon] (Coreno 1965), are characterised by a Leopardian sentimental pessimism and present reflections on love, death, the meaning of life, anguish and the passing of time. These early volumes are dominated by a search for an unfindable equilibrium, a vain attempt to secure answers to the enigmas posed by life and to resolve its uncertainties.

## Sogni

L’alba fiorisce nella notte  
svegliando i monti

svettanti nel cielo [ ... ]

All'alba tutti i sogni

volano nella fantasia.

Ricomincia il fervore

della vita,

l'assedio del dolore [ ... ]

e il tempo continua

la sua strada indifferente

alla voce di chi lo prega

di fermarsi almeno

un poco, di riposare.

(Coreno 1965, 8)

## **Dreams**

Dawn flowers in the night

awakening the mountains

reaching up to the sky [ ... ]

At dawn all dreams

fly into fantasy.

The frenzy of life

begins again,

the onslaught of grief [ ... ]

and time continues  
on its way indifferent  
to those who plead with it  
to stop at least  
for a little while, to rest.

This sense of uncertainty is emphasised in the collection *Pianto d'amore*, which focuses on the concept of love, symbolised through the figure of Silvia as either a lost love or one for whom the poet is searching – who, if found, could present a possible solution to the enigmas of life. Everything in life 'E' tutto amaro / come voci di aborigeni / persi nel tempo' (Is all bitter / like the voices of Aboriginals / lost in time) (Coreno 1963, 15). Yet the ever-evasive figure of Silvia represents potential hope and resolution: 'Ascolta. Senza di te / la sera finisce qui. / Ascolta, Silvia bella ...' (Listen. Without you / the evening ends here. / Listen, beautiful Silvia ...) (Coreno 1963, 24).

*Pianto d'amore* also marks the introduction of images with Australian referents, but it is not until *Vento al Sole* [*Wind in the Sun*] (Coreno 1968) that Australian themes and a discourse on the existential condition of the migrant become predominant. *Yellow Sun* (Coreno 1980) is a collection of Coreno's English poetry (including some poems from the preceding Italian volumes rewritten in English) and is the result of the substantial encouragement given to Coreno by Judith Wright.

In his early poetry, Coreno depicted Australia as a place without illusions, since it represents spiritual marginalisation, isolation, and a life experience that is melancholic, destructive and fatal. This theme begins to take shape in 'Emigrato' ['Migrant'] (Coreno 1964, 21) and is then developed in 'Australia' (Coreno 1968, 11), where there is some hint of the possibility of acceptance even though, in the final analysis, the diasporic condition is found to be no less anguishing than the experience of love.

### **Australia**

Australia  
giovane terra sorridente  
dalle acque circondata;  
mi ascolti?  
Ho spezzato il mio cuore  
per saperti, per conoscere

il sangue delle tue vene,  
per attingere nuove rose  
dai giardini della tua poesia.  
Sai, questo esilio volontario  
adesso è cara fusione  
tra passato e presente,  
tra realtà e sogno,  
tra erba e polvere.  
Con l'andare del tempo  
qualcosa in me s'è spento  
e poi è risorto a farmi luce  
nel crepuscolo della sera.  
L'integrazione  
si scopre a poco a poco  
come le parole  
di un grande amore,  
Australia del mio cuore.  
(Coreno 1968, 11)

## **Australia**

Australia,  
smiling young country



surrounded by water;  
are you listening to me?  
I've broken my heart  
To know you, to know  
the blood in your veins,  
to discover new roses  
in the gardens of your poetry.  
You know, this voluntary exile of mine  
is now a dear blending  
of past and present,  
of reality and dream,  
of grass and dust.  
As time went on  
something in me went out  
but then re-awakened to give me light  
in the twilight of evening.

#### Integration

discloses a little at a time  
like the words  
of a great love,  
Australia of my heart.

For Coreno, forced to live far from his native land, migration represents exile. It is only in the idealised memory of a pre-emigration past that it is possible for him to find some inkling of happiness, of *'lacrime di ricordi, / di gioia smarrita'* (the tears of memory / of lost joy) ('Trinità dei Monti' in Genovesi 1991, 153), even though the reality of life in the native land was one of endless suffering. The humble migrant who exchanges his *'sudore / nella pazienza del giorno / per un futuro sicuro / ... nella soggezione delle strade straniere'* (sweat / in the patience of the day / for a secure

future / ... among the uneasiness of foreign roads) (Coreno 1968, 16) must confront a land that cannot offer a sense of belonging or of spiritual satisfaction:

### **Al ritorno di scuola**

Lavoro tante ore al giorno  
che quando sono libero  
mi sento smarrito,  
incapace di muovere un dito.  
Eppure,  
mi chiamano, quasi con disprezzo,  
‘nuovo australiano’  
(Genovesi 1991, 145)

### **Returning from School**

I work so many hours a day  
that when I am free  
I feel lost,  
unable to move a finger.  
Yet,  
they call me, almost despisingly,  
‘new Australian’

In contrast to the concepts expressed in Luigi Strano's poetry, even the attempt to seek a reconciliation with the new land and its society remains unrequited. Mariano Coreno's poetry is thus marked by an existentialist experience; there is an anguish caused by the realisation that migration has brought neither fortune nor happiness but '*la stessa luna / e la stessa disperazione*' (the same moon / and the same desperation) ('Sono andato All'Esterò' ['I Went Abroad'] in Genovesi 1991, 143).

In his latest poetry, however, social issues are highlighted and elements of optimism are gradually introduced:

passano sulla loro strada

bellissime ragazze:

impossibili da afferrare

come sulle foglie

all'imbrunire

il sole che tramonta

(Coreno 2001, 14).

they go on their way

these beautiful girls

impossible to catch

like the setting sun

on the leaves

as dusk advances

Although characterised by a diaspora-centered discourse, the texts produced by these first-generation Italian-Australian poets – Luigi Strano, Enoe Di Stefano, Lino Concas, Paolo Totaro, Mariano Coreno – contain a variety of themes and concepts that present an often complex mix of gravitas, poignancy,

irony and humour. Migration and more general life experiences are, in many ways, seen as two interrelated aspects of the individuals' search for the meaning of life.

For these and many other writers, the crossing to a new world and a new life was seen as an acceptable realisation of a richer and fuller life. For others, however, the long journey has not lived up to its promise – dreams did not become reality and nostalgia triggers a sense of not belonging to either the past or the present, a metaphysical wandering that cannot be fully resolved. In all cases, engagement with the liminal divide that encompasses the social realities of the diaspora offers insights into the thoughts and feelings that constitute the inner life of the migrant, the constant and ever-shifting appraisal of two different cultures in an attempt to de-mythologise and re-mythologise past and present in light of new experience.

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